

Message

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Sent: 1/13/2021 2:02:18 PM
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Subject: WaPo interview with Administrator Wheeler

Just passing along FYI.

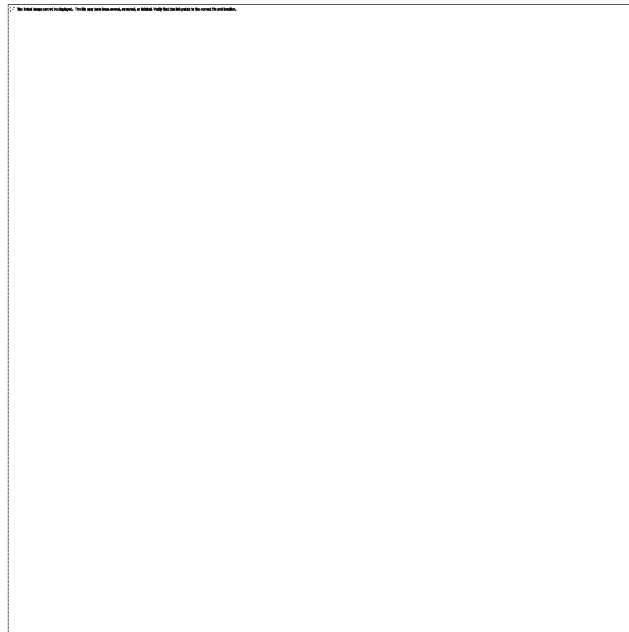
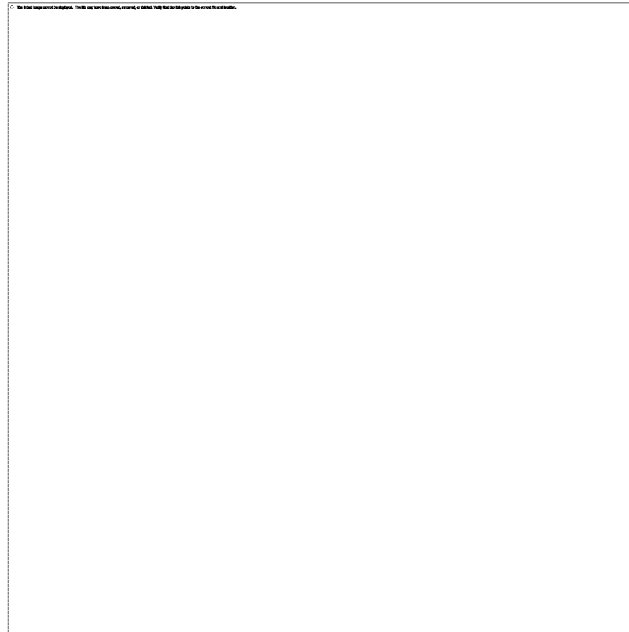
From: The Washington Post <email@washingtonpost.com>
Sent: Wednesday, January 13, 2021 8:06 AM
To: Deegan, Dave <Deegan.Dave@epa.gov>
Subject: The Energy 202: Trump's EPA chief hopes Biden doesn't focus solely on climate change

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By Juliet Eilperin and Brady Dennis

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 Email

Trump's EPA chief hopes Biden doesn't focus solely on climate change

President-elect Joe Biden will make combatting climate change a top priority, calling it “an existential threat.”

But in a wide-ranging interview Tuesday, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler said it would be a mistake for the incoming administration to concentrate on climate change to the exclusion of other environmental priorities.

“I hope that they aren't as single-focused — the Biden administration — as the Obama administration was,” said Wheeler, who has highlighted marine litter, getting lead out of the nation’s water supply and cleanup of Superfund sites during his tenure. Biden has picked North Carolina regulator Michael S. Regan to succeed him.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler at the agency's offices last year. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

Wheeler's advice to Regan: "I hope that he's going to look at broader issues."

While Biden's proposals include taking on a litany of environmental ills, the new president is unlikely to take advice on climate change from Wheeler, who has overseen some of the most significant of the more than 125 rollbacks of environmental regulations undertaken during the Trump administration.

In Tuesday's interview, Wheeler embraced that record, dismissing the well-documented criticisms from environmental advocates that President Trump has presided over an assault on environmental safeguards, Obama-era efforts to curb climate change and the work of agency scientists.

“I think we have proven that you can reduce pollution and have cost-effective regulations,” he said.

Wheeler said that he made the agency more efficient during his two and-a-half years at its helm. He has run the agency since July 2018, after Trump’s first EPA chief, Scott Pruitt, stepped down amid a series of ethics scandals. The agency is set to unveil Pruitt’s official portrait Friday.

Many career EPA employees, public health groups and Democrats have criticized Wheeler for his approach to regulating pollutants and weighing scientific evidence in policymaking. But he emphasized that the agency had eliminated a backlog of 125 Clean Water Act permits and cut the bottleneck of pending state plans aimed at improving air quality by more than half.

“We’ve put in place efficiency changes in the agency that will last a generation,” he said. “This agency is stronger than it’s ever been.”

Wheeler expressed hope the incoming administration would “build off” some of the Trump administration’s work, even as Biden has already pledged to reverse many of its most significant policies.

While the president-elect has pledged to impose stricter tailpipe emissions on cars and light trucks, for example, Wheeler said the administration was justified in weakening them because the auto industry “still aren’t meeting the Obama standard.”

Data released by the EPA last week showed the U.S. auto fleet’s average fuel efficiency in 2020 actually declined for the first time in five years. Under the standards adopted under Obama, overall gas mileage was set to increase by 5 percent annually through Model Year 2025.

Wheeler says he is not leaving his post after the attack on the Capitol by a pro-Trump mob.

Wheeler acknowledged in the interview that some of his allies had urged him to resign over Trump’s role in the violence that took place at the U.S. Capitol last Wednesday. The heads of EPA’s policy and legislative affairs offices, both Trump appointees who had worked on the Hill, quit in protest on Monday.

“I was actually in Costa Rica and only saw the footage of what went on in the Capitol,” said Wheeler, who called into a senior staff meeting Thursday morning when his top aides debated whether to step down.

Asked whether he thought the president incited the violent incident, Wheeler said, “And at this point, I know all that’s being investigated, by Congress, and even the U.S. attorney has referenced that. So I think it would be inappropriate to comment on the instigation for what happened Wednesday.”

“I was completely disgusted by what happened Wednesday,” he added, but said he ultimately decided he would not follow fellow Cabinet members such as Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos out the door. “I took an oath of office,

and I believe I owe an obligation to the agency and the American public. We still have work to do.”

Wheeler declined to say what might lie ahead for him — outside of home improvement projects.

“After being in this job for almost three years, I have let so much go around my house,” he said.

Wheeler began his career as an EPA employee before working in the Senate and as a lobbyist for coal companies and other clients. Before taking a job in the Trump administration, Wheeler worked for the law firm Faegre Baker Daniels.

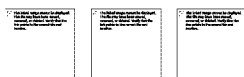
He had planned to travel to Australia for a month-and-a-half after his tenure ended.

“Unfortunately, you know, travel’s out of the question now.”

So after years of what allies and critics alike would agree was an unrelenting push to carry out Trump’s agenda, he plans to merely take a breath.

“I’m in no rush to jump into anything else,” he said, adding, “I am honestly exhausted.”

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Power plays

Rick Snyder will face criminal charges in Flint water crisis.

The former Michigan governor is expected to be charged alongside several other ex-officials for his role in the 2014 Flint water crisis, according to a report by the Associated Press. The crisis, which started when the city switched its water supply to the Flint River as a cost-saving measure, left at least a dozen dead from a Legionnaire's outbreak and harmed the

health of many more residents in the predominantly Black city, our colleagues Kim Bellware and Brady Dennis write.

The office of Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel notified Snyder, his former health department director Nick Lyon and former adviser Rich Baird of pending indictments, the Associated Press reported, citing unnamed sources. Nessel's office declined to provide comment on the probe or provide information about the nature of the charges.

Former Gov. Rick Snyder. (Carlos Barria/Reuters)

Mona Hanna-Attisha, whose research in 2015 first documented dangerously high lead levels in children's blood in the city, described the charges as a crucial step toward justice.

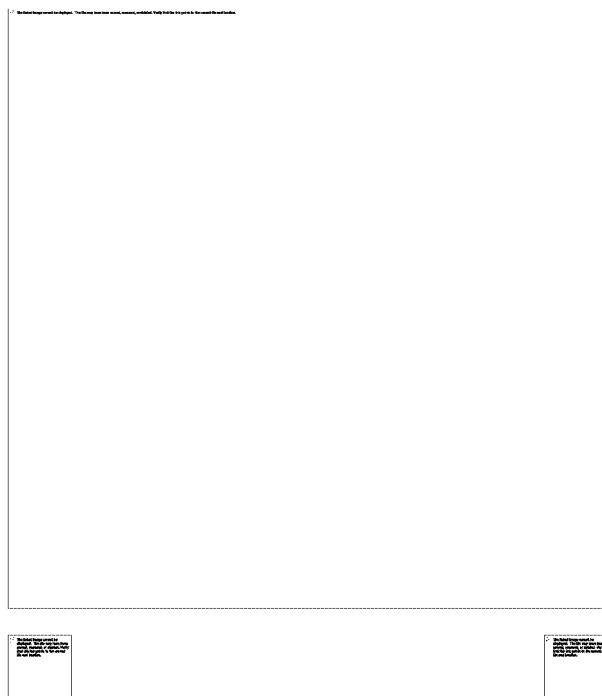
"As a pediatrician privileged to care for our Flint children, I have increasingly come to understand that accountability and justice are critical to health & recovery," Hanna-Attisha

told The Post in a text message Tuesday. “Without justice, it’s impossible to heal the scars of the crisis.”

Trump appointees published controversial climate papers without approval.

David Legates and Ryan Maue, senior officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), were reassigned after they published papers questioning the seriousness of climate change without White House approval, our colleagues Andrew Freedman and Jason Samenow report.

“The papers include the claim that subscribing to the idea of human-caused global warming ‘involves a large measure of faith’ and that computer models are ‘too small and slow’ to produce meaningful climate simulations,” Freedman and Samenow write.



Screen shot of introduction to series of "Climate Change Information Briefs" published by David Legates.

Legates and Made had been detailed to the White House since November and their papers bear the imprint of the Executive Office. But the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, Kelvin Droegemeier, never approved their publication. Their dismissal from the White House office means that they will return to NOAA for their final days working for the Trump administration. NOAA also disavowed the papers and said that the agency was not involved in their creation or posting.

A new EPA rule sharply limits new regulations on industrial pollution.

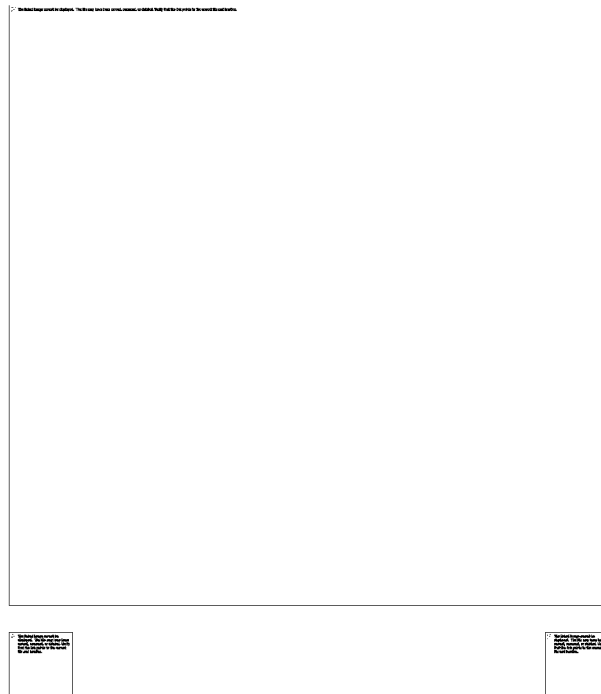
The new rule prohibits future regulations on any source whose industry-wide emissions account for less than 3 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. This would effectively exclude every stationary polluter besides power plants, Politico reports.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler. (Susan Walsh/AP)

“The rule comes just eight days before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who has pledged a multitrillion-dollar initiative that would combat climate change by making sharp cuts in the United States’ carbon dioxide pollution,” Politico writes. “The new regulation could hamstring much of that agenda, for example by prohibiting Biden’s EPA from setting carbon limits on oil and gas wells or refineries.”

The rule was included as part of a long-planned, much narrower regulation aimed at easing greenhouse gas limits for future coal plants. The agency did not seek public comment on the

proposal to exempt large swaths of industry from future regulations, potentially imperiling the rule in court challenges.



United Airlines aims to suck carbon out of the skies.

The airline is the first major U.S. carrier to back carbon capture, our colleague Steven Mufson reports. The company will invest millions of dollars in a venture that will pull carbon out of the air.

“United is increasingly focused on its voluntary goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 — good publicity at a time of growing alarm about climate change,” Mufson writes. “But it may also be placing an early bet that carbon capture technology could — with the help of federal tax credits — prove profitable as the globe races for ways to cut the pollution that threatens the planet.”

The allure of carbon capture may be particularly appealing for the aviation industry. The industry account for 3.5 percent of the planet's greenhouse gases each year, and there are few low-carbon alternatives in commercial aviation.

United Airlines planes sit parked on a runway. (Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images)

United will partner with 1PointFive, a joint venture designed to finance and deploy a large-scale direct air capture plan. The company, which gets its name from the U.N. goal of limiting average global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius, was formed by a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum and Rusheen Capital Management. Its first plant will be in the Texas Permian Basin, where Occidental plans to take carbon dioxide from the air and pump it into old wells to extract more oil.

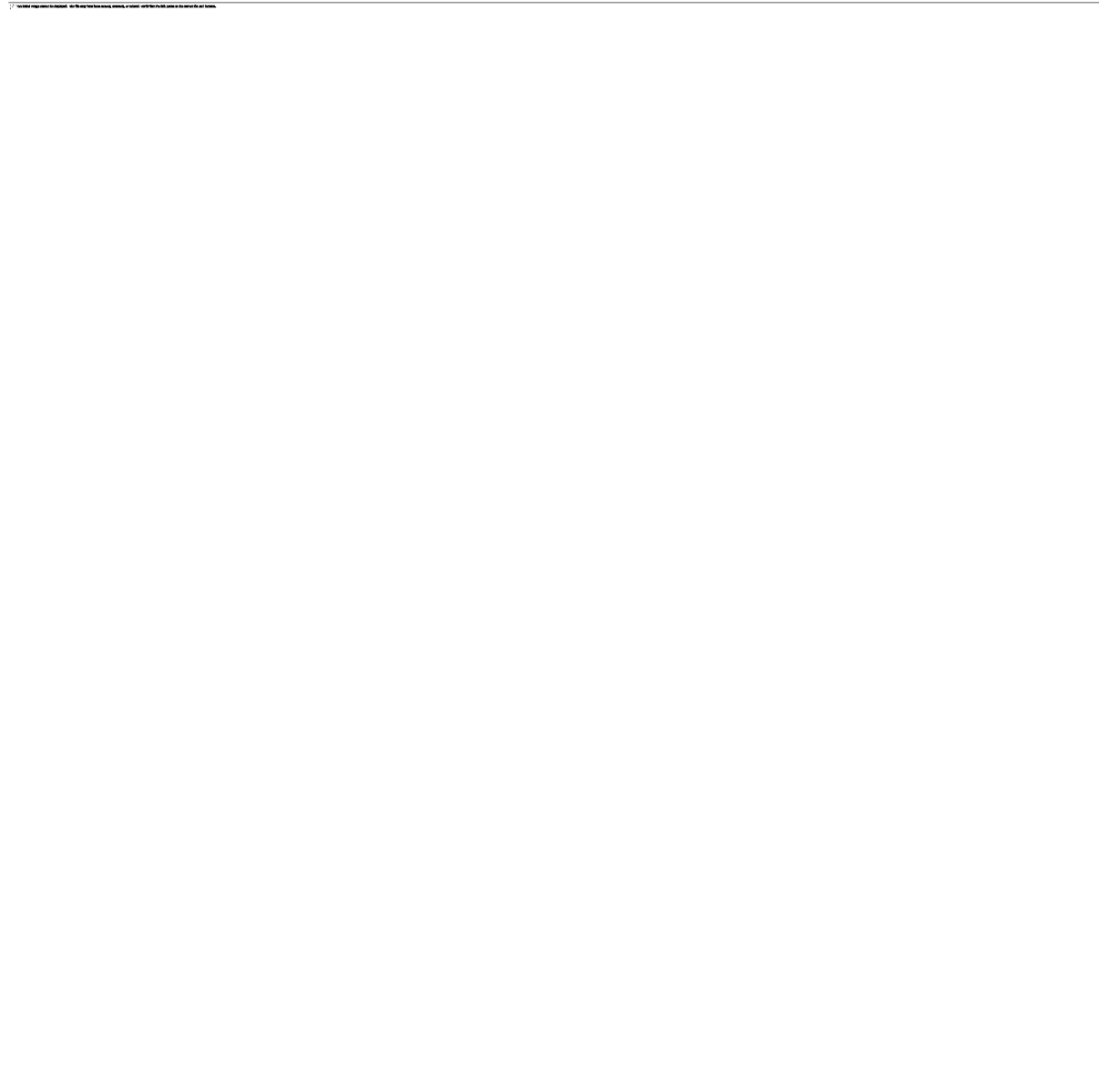
“But extracting more oil from underground doesn’t please climate activists, although the money will help 1PointFive cover Carbon Engineering’s estimated cost of \$100 for each ton of carbon dioxide captured,” Mufson writes.

Insects face ‘death by a thousand cuts.’

A series of papers published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences paint a dire picture for global insect populations, the Guardian reports.

“Nature is under siege...[and] most biologists agree that the world has entered its sixth mass extinction event,” concludes the lead analysis in the package. “Insects are suffering from ‘death by a thousand cuts.’ ”

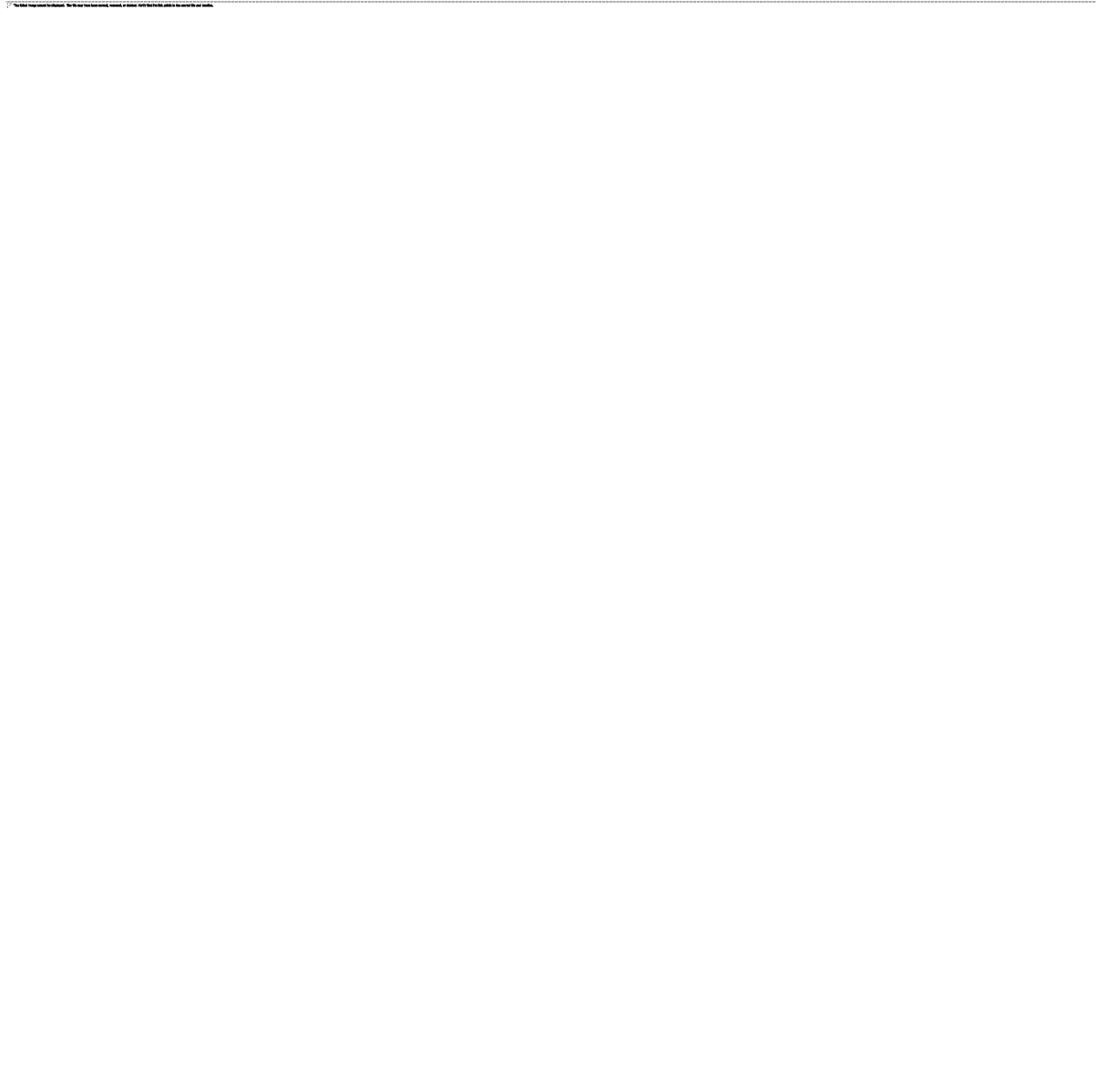
One study found that butterfly populations in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands have declined by 50 percent. Still, the picture is complex. Some insect populations have increased, for instance, as global warming leads to milder winters and allows them to expand their range.



A Monarch butterfly. (Robert F. Bukaty/AP)

Meanwhile, some activists are pushing to ramp up protections for one threatened insect. The Center for Biological Diversity has said it intends to sue the

Trump administration in an attempt to restore the American burying beetle's endangered species status. U.S. Fish and Wildlife downgraded the beetle's status from endangered to threatened after oil and natural gas companies complained that the insect's protected status was interfering with plans for drilling and laying pipeline.

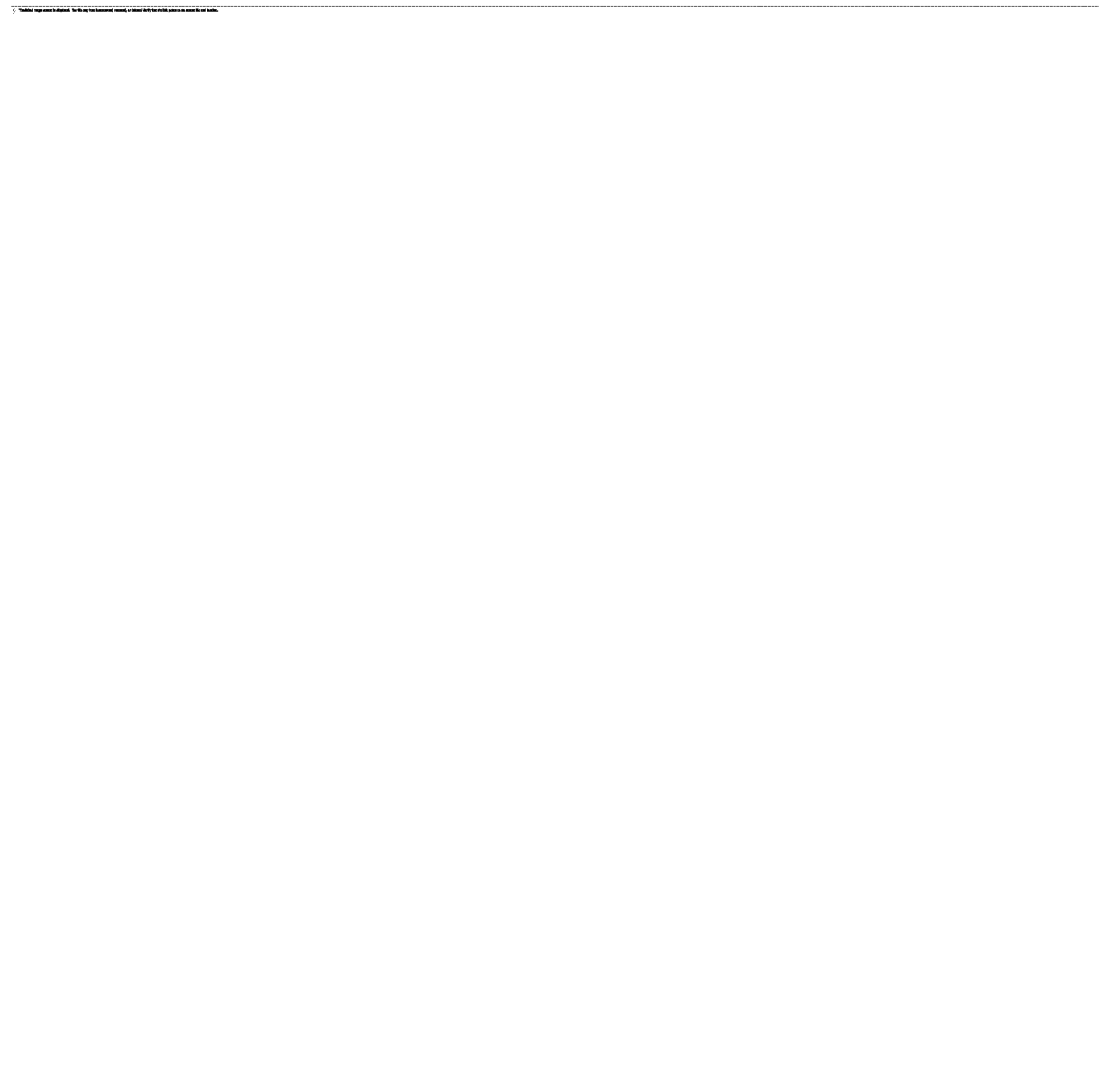


An American burying beetle. (Merrily Cassidy/Cape Cod Times via AP)

Extra mileage

A new group of climate scientists is launching a campaign to engage mothers.

Six climate scientists who are also mothers have launched a \$10 million campaign to educate and empower other mothers to do something about climate change, our colleague Sarah Kaplan reports. Advertisements featuring the scientists will be on national TV and online for the next month.



Colorado State University atmospheric scientist Melissa Burt is featured in one of the group's ads talking about how her 4-year-old daughter added urgency to her climate work.

